ART AND WORLD WAR I

Artists and the Call for Social Change

Modernist artists, such as Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, and Marcel Duchamp responded to the chaos of impending and actual war by creating new styles of art that challenged the past. The artists associated with Dada, for example, questioned the value of reason and so-called progress, which had only led to mass societal belligerence. Kandinsky's expressionistic use of color provided a spiritual antidote to the modern world.

Three of the four artists we will discuss in this section of the guide were also associated in one way or another with the movements we have already explored. Modernist artists, we will see, often moved from place to place and used their work to enter into a dialogue across Europe and in America. However, these particular works were selected because the artists made direct statements about World War I, either through their paintings and sculptures or through their writings. Umberto Boccioni, a Futurist painter and sculptor, loved everything fast, modern, and destructive, and he proposed that the complete breakdown of tradition was the path to progress. Marsden Hartley and George Grosz both worked in Germany, painting during and after the war. Their works were highly psychological, reflecting a very personal perspective. Outside of the world of modernist art, James Montgomery Flagg, working in the United States, created iconic images that were intended to convince viewers to support the war effort. Together, these four works demonstrate a range of possibilities for artists working in the context of World War I.

SELECTED ARTWORK

Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, Umberto Boccioni, 1913 (cast 1931)

Futurism and Social Change

The early twentieth century was a time of rapid modernization and social change, on the eve of WWI, a war that shook Europe to its core. In response, Italian Futurists proposed that art and literature must make a violent leap to the future, forcefully rejecting the influence of the past, which they characterized as "romantic," "sentimental," and from their misogynistic perspective, "feminine." Poet and publisher Filippo Marinetti laid out the goals of the new movement in the 1909 Manifesto of Futurism, stating: "We want to exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist."[7]

The Futurists were fascinated with modern technology, speed, and the potential for social agitation to lead to the overthrow of tradition. While inspired by the formal qualities of Cubism, with its radical new approach to depicting space, the Futurists politicized their work by writing aggressively about their desire to overthrow the past and their enthusiastic celebration of war.

The words of the 1909 *Manifesto* were indeed loaded with ammunition, as Marinetti asserted "we want to glorify war..." and "we want to demolish museums and libraries."[8] For the Futurists, the artistic challenge to the past went hand in hand with a social and political revolution, one that would create a new, modern machine age. In reality, the Futurists could not have foreseen the loss and tragedy of World War

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The Italian poet and publisher Filippo Marinetti founded the Futurist movement, which put forth the idea that art ought to reject the influence of the past and make a violent leap to the future.

I. Many of the artists associated with the movement volunteered to fight in the war, and several, Boccioni included, died. By 1918, the Futurist movement as it had existed on the cusp of the war had dissolved.

After the war and Boccioni's death, Futurism reemerged in the 1920s through the 1930s. During this period Marinetti supported Fascism and promoted Futurism as the artistic manifestation of that political movement. However, there were also radical leftist artists and writers associated with the movement who found themselves at odds with Marinetti's ideas.

Umberto Boccioni: The Artist's Life

Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916) was a painter and sculptor born in Reggio di Calabria, a city in southern Italy. He studied painting in Rome beginning in 1901, and in this early period he began to work under Giacomo Balla, who would later join Boccioni as a Futurist. Boccioni traveled frequently while he was in his twenties, visiting Russia, Paris, and Italian cities such as Milan and Venice. Settling in Milan in 1907, he frequented the Famiglia Artistica, an artist's society that hosted exhibitions, and he came to know other members of the Futurist group, especially the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Marinetti published the first Futurist manifesto in 1909, a text that made a great impression on Boccioni, who would soon become a leading theorist of the movement. Boccioni contributed to the 1910 publications *Manifesto of Futurist Painting* (February 11, 1910) and the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* (April 11, 1910).

In the fall of 1911, Boccioni traveled to Paris where he met Picasso and Braque. Soon he was particularly influenced by Cubist sculptors such as Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Marcel Duchamp's brother. Beginning in 1912, Boccioni began to devote himself to sculpture, and he soon published the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* (April 11, 1912). An active theorist as well as a practicing artist, he wrote a book in 1914 entitled *Futurist Painting and Sculpture (Plastic Dynamism)* and exhibited actively. Boccioni enlisted in the army during World War I, and began active duty in July 1915. Just over a year later, in August 1916, Boccioni died at the age of thirty-three following an accident during a cavalry training exercise.

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Umberto Boccioni, self-portrait, March 1913.
Photograph. Calmarini Collection, Milan.

Subject Matter and Visual Analysis

Boccioni created *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* in plaster. He intended to eventually cast the work in bronze, but, given the expense of casting a work in metal, as well as the fact that the weight of the final piece would have made it difficult to move around, it was quite typical for artists to exhibit plaster models as final works of art. The sculpture was never actually cast in bronze during the artist's lifetime; the first two bronze casts of the work were made in 1931. The sculpture shown in the *Art Reproductions Booklet* is from this period. Several other casts were made later, and so you may also encounter this sculpture in other museums throughout the world.

The piece depicts an abstracted human figure in motion, though the sculpture is nearly forty-three inches high, and so it is smaller than life-size. Two block-like pedestals at its "feet" ground the figure as it strides forward; the front leg is bent as the back leg pushes off from the ground with great energy. The torso is leaning slightly forward, and, although faceless, the figure seems to gaze straight ahead. Though the figure lacks arms, it almost seems as if it could fly off if it weren't rooted to the ground. Rather than depicting the solidity of human form, or attempting to convey naturalistic musculature, the artist has created the sense of the human body in motion through a series of curvilinear, feathery forms that flow around and from the body.

Contextual Analysis

A line from the 1909 *Futurist Manifesto* reflects the brazen optimism of the group in its early years, and a sense that the future belonged to youthful leaders:

> *The oldest [Futurists] are not yet thirty years old: we have therefore at least ten years to accomplish our task. When we are forty let other younger and stronger men throw us in the waste-basket like useless manuscripts.*[9]

The Futurist artists were enamored with change and progress, and from today's perspective, their youthful exuberance may seem naïve. We can now see, of course, that even though these artists hoped to reject tradition, they built on the foundations of the past. In the case of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, the forceful, striding pose evokes classical sculptures such as the monumental *Nike of Samothrace*, which was on display in the Louvre by the time Boccioni created his sculpture.[10] However, when rendered in shiny, polished metal rather than in a classical material such as marble, the sculpture seems to celebrate the machine age. It is a dynamic victory figure for the modern world that the Futurists envisioned.

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SELECTED ARTWORK

Portrait of a German Officer, Marsden Hartley, 1914

Marsden Hartley: Biography

Marsden Hartley (1877–1943) was an American artist who painted some of his most notable works while living in Berlin during the early years of World War I. Hartley was born in Cleveland, and he received formal training in the arts there and in New York. In his early career, he worked in Maine and Boston, but in 1909 Hartley moved to New York and began to associate with avant-garde artists. He gained the support of Alfred Stieglitz, who showed Hartley's work at his 291 Gallery and encouraged his travel to Paris in 1912. In Paris, Hartley developed a friendship with Gertrude Stein as well as with the circle of artists and collectors who frequented her *salons*. He was inspired by Matisse and Picasso, and he was aware of the latest artistic developments such as Futurism. Although the Futurist movement was largely Italian, the 1909 manifesto was published in Paris, and so it is reasonable to propose that Hartley reacted to the tenets of Futurism in his Expressionist paintings.

Traveling to Berlin in 1913, Hartley developed an interest in the work of the German Expressionists Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. Hartley felt at home in Berlin, a city that in the early twentieth century was known for its lively homosexual subculture, and he stayed there until the war forced him to return to the United States in 1916. Beginning in 1914, Hartley produced a series of works that reflected both his fascination with the pageantry of war and his rejection of its destructive forces. The abstract

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A group of young American artists of the Modern School (from left to right: Jo Davidson, Edward Steichen, Arthur B. Carles, John Marin; back: Marsden Hartley, Laurence Fellows), c. 1911, Bates College Museum of Art.

paintings he produced during this time, referred to as his War Motif paintings, reveal the influence of both Cubism and Expressionism.

After the war, Hartley spent many years traveling and painting. Over the following decades he lived and worked on the East Coast of the United States, in New Mexico, Mexico, Bermuda, Bavaria, Nova Scotia, and the south of France. In 1937 he settled in Maine, where he lived until his death in 1943. He eventually abandoned the abstract mode of painting he had developed in Germany and produced naturalistic landscapes and still life paintings. His late works depict the landscapes and seascapes of Maine.

Subject Matter and Visual Analysis

Portrait of a German Officer challenges viewers to reflect on the meaning of portraiture as a genre, much as Picasso's portrait of Marcelle Humbert does. The work does not portray its subject directly, but rather the German Officer of the title is evoked through symbolic references. With no real sense of depth, the painting appears to contain a mass of overlapping geometric patterns and curvilinear shapes on a field of black. The palette is limited to black, white, gray, red, gold, blue, and green, and in many areas is painted with thick brushstrokes. A closer look reveals that the forms are not entirely abstract, though, and we begin to discern recognizable elements, such as flags and insignia that might appear on a uniform.

At the center in the top three-quarters of the composition is the black and white Iron Cross contained within a yellow triangle. The Iron Cross was a military decoration that was first awarded in Prussia during the Napoleonic Wars. By the time of this painting, Prussia had been incorporated into the German Empire, and the Iron Cross was transformed into a more generic symbol of the Germany military. Checkered and striped flags in red, gray, white, and black make reference to the German Empire and Bavaria, although Hartley took liberties with the arrangement of the colors. Red, black, white, green, yellow, and blue are all colors that had nationalistic and regional associations in the German Empire at that time.

Among the badges and medals, some make direct references to the specific officer evoked in this portrait, Karl von Freyburg. Von Freyburg was killed in October 1914, soon after the outbreak of the war, and he was awarded the Iron Cross for his service posthumously. His initials, Kv.F., appear in the lower left corner near the number twenty-four, Freyburg's age at death. Four, the number of von Freyburg's regiment, is located in the center of the composition. The "e" may refer to a class insignia, or it may also be a reference to Hartley's initials—his first name at birth was Edmund. (He later changed his name to reflect his affinity for his step-mother, whose last name was Marsden.)

Scholars speculate that Hartley had a romantic relationship with the young Prussian officer. Whether or not such a relationship existed, it is certain that Hartley had a close friendship with and great admiration for von Freyburg, whose life he memorialized not only in *Portrait of a German Officer*, but in other works from this period as well.

Contextual Analysis

During the years that Hartley lived in Berlin, he witnessed many public pageants and parades featuring full military regalia. These public spectacles were staged in order to demonstrate Germany's military might. In August 1913, Hartley wrote to his friend Gertrude Stein professing his admiration for the urban displays of Berlin.[11] Urban military spectacle was an essential part of modern life in Berlin on the eve of the war, and Hartley captured its frenetic energy with the bright colors and intersecting forms of his works.

While similarly engaged with the energy of modern, urban life, Hartley rejected the aesthetic approach of Futurism in favor of the more organic forms and symbolic language of Expressionism. Although he gravitated toward abstraction as a new, avant-garde approach, he did not express the same violence toward the past that the Futurists did. In addition, although Hartley represented German military insig-

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Photograph of Gertrude Stein by Alvin Langdon Coburn, George Eastman House Collection. Marsden Hartley developed a friendship with Stein as well as with the circle of artists and collectors who frequented Stein's salons.

nia repeatedly in his works, he did not do this in a propagandistic fashion. Rather than presenting an indiscriminant celebration of Germany during World War I, on a deeper level Hartley seems to have intended the paintings in this series to serve as a means to mourn the tragedy of war, and a young life cut short.

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SELECTED ARTWORK

Republican Automatons, George Grosz, 1920

George Grosz: Art and Politics

George Grosz (1893–1959) was especially known for caricatures and paintings that criticized and mocked the structure of society in the decade following World War I. Grosz grew up in the Pomeranian region of Germany, now part of Poland. He attended weekly drawing classes with a local teacher and eventually studied at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts (1909–11) and the Berlin College of Arts and Crafts (1912), before moving to Paris for continued study at the Académie Colarossi.

Grosz volunteered for military service in 1914, but he was soon discharged after an illness. He was conscripted back into the army in 1917, but was discharged permanently within a matter of months. By this time, Grosz had become radically opposed to German nationalism. He changed the spelling of his first name (adding an "e" at the end), in order to reflect his affinity for the United States and Great Britain. By the end of the war, Grosz's art had also become highly politicized.

After the end of World War I and the subsequent German Revolution, Grosz joined the Communist Party and took a very radical stance in opposition to the Weimar Republic. This was reflected in his art from the 1920s, which was satirical and often even grotesque. Grosz created a series of caricatured figures that stood for the various social classes and sectors of society, and he repeated certain tropes—the fat man with the cigar representing the bourgeoisie, getting rich at the expense of the poor; the disheveled solider representing the forgotten sacrifices of the common citizen—in many of his works.

An outspoken critic of the Nazi Party, Grosz immigrated to the United States in 1932. By that time, he had broken with the Communist Party, and his work became less political. He moved away from caricature and painted landscapes and other more conventional subjects. He spent most of his late career teaching art in New York. Grosz returned to Berlin in 1959, but he died soon after from injuries resulting from a fall.

Subject Matter and Visual Analysis

Republican Automatons is a small watercolor and pencil drawing on paper. Grosz depicts two figures on a deserted urban street. In marked contrast to the parades and pageants that Hartley had witnessed in the streets of Berlin in the years leading up to the war, the grid-like maze of sidewalks and buildings behind the two men is utterly barren and lifeless. The two male figures are dressed in the fashionable clothing of businessmen. The figure on the right wears the Iron Cross, a symbol of his honorable military service during World War I. The figure on the left, wearing a bowler hat, waves the German flag in his hand.

The two figures, of course, are not exactly portraits of men Grosz encountered on the street. Instead, they appear to be hollow machines in the shape of men, or automatons. If we look at the man with the bowler hat, we see that his arms are made of cylinders that fail to fit together properly. One hand, waving the flag, is only a small metallic claw, while the other is entirely absent. One leg ends at

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Photograph of George Grosz at work. Grosz is known especially for his caricatures and paintings that criticized and mocked the structure of society in the decade following World War I.

mid-thigh and is replaced with a peg. Amputations were a common affliction for men who had fought in the war, of course, but Grosz made his figure truly bizarre by erasing his facial features as well. A large number "12" appears on the man's face in place of any identifying details.

The second figure, seen only from the waist up, is even more clearly an automaton rather than a living, feeling human being. A set of gears is attached to his body, just below his armpit, making it appear as though his arm can be raised and lowered using this mechanism. One arm ends at the elbow, while the other reveals a peg where a false hand might be attached. Lacking a bowler hat, we see that the man's head opens to reveal itself as an empty container. Numbers and words enter the empty space of his head, although the meaning is left open to interpretation.

Grosz's style is very linear and precise. Drawing is the foundation of his work, and color is secondary. The colors, in keeping with the medium of watercolor, are cool and muted. The architecture, with its precise, geometric lines and absence of life, is reminiscent of the cityscapes of Grosz's Greek-Italian contemporary, Giorgio de Chirico. In both cases, we don't see a real city, but an imagined urban space. For Grosz, this is a dystopia in which human identity is erased by the coldness of the Weimar Republic. In this way, we may see connections between this work and the Surrealist and Dada movements.

Contextual Analysis

While Hartley painted life in Berlin at the beginning of the war, Grosz's most famous works were produced after the war, in the 1920s. *Republican Automatons* as well as other works from this period serve as a critique of the Weimar Republic. The Weimar Republic was formed in 1919, following the end of World War I and the German Revolution of 1918–19. The Weimar Republic replaced the German Empire and was a time of great political tension and hyperinflation. Many people felt that the new government had betrayed the workers and that it ruled with false authority. Grosz's work is critical of the Weimar Republic because he proposes that the ruling class

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is unthinking and unfeeling, moved only by false notions of progress.

While Boccioni celebrated the machine age, Grosz condemned it. Human identity—which might have been indicated by the man's distinct facial features—has been replaced by the arbitrary number "12." Nationalism, represented by the waving flag, supersedes any individual identity. Grosz's portrayal of this new modern world is cynical and even satirical, as his automatons are situated in a city that is devoid of life.

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SELECTED ARTWORK

Wake Up, America! James Montgomery Flagg, 1917

Wartime Propaganda

This popular poster is fundamentally different from any of the works of art we have discussed up to this point. Boccioni, Grosz, and Hartley expressed their personal reactions to war through paintings and sculptures intended to be consumed by a select public that visited galleries and was familiar with fine art. Flagg, on the other hand, was a popular illustrator who created this image to address a broad public through print media. The image was meant to serve as a strong critique of popular disengagement with politics and to encourage active support of the war effort. We can classify this poster as propaganda because the intention was to spread a message to a large audience and to have an impact on how people thought and behaved.

World War I was the first time that the United States government launched a widespread propaganda campaign. President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (known as the CPI), chaired by journalist George Creel, in 1917, immediately after the United States entered the war. The CPI used radio, moving pictures, newspapers, and posters to encourage support of the war. For posters in particular, the goals were multifaceted, and included encouraging recruitment into the various arms of the military, raising funds for the war through the sale of liberty bonds, increasing public awareness of and support for the war efforts, and encouraging prudent use of resources in a time of shortages.

Many of the posters used a great deal of text to convey their message, but some relied more heavily on visual imagery. The context in which a poster was viewed—usually seen quickly by passersby on the street or flipped past in a magazine—required the images to be forceful and concise. Some of the best posters used symbolism that was powerful in its historical references, but that could also speak clearly to a popular audience.

James Montgomery Flagg's most famous piece, the Uncle Sam poster, started out as a magazine cover illustration for *Leslie's Weekly*, before it enjoyed a new life as a recruiting poster.

James Montgomery Flagg's Career

James Montgomery Flagg (1877–1960) is probably best known for his depiction of a confrontational Uncle Sam; a personification of the United States, juxtaposed with the text "I Want You!" and the address of the nearest military recruiting center. For this iconic poster, Flagg actually used his own facial features in order to save the money and trouble of hiring a model. The Uncle Sam poster emerged as an iconic image during the World War I era, and over 4 million copies were printed between 1917 and 1918. Due to the great potency and success of this image, it was used again in World War II.[12]

Flagg was born in New York and had early success as an illustrator. His first works were published when he was just twelve years old, and by age fifteen, he was on the permanent staff of *Life* and *Judge*, two magazines with national distributions. When he was

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Photograph of James Montgomery Flagg. Although he experimented with painting, Flagg's greatest success came as an illustrator.

old enough, he studied at the Art Students League of New York, and then traveled to London and Paris from 1898 to 1900. Although he experimented with painting, his greatest success was always as an illustrator.

Flagg had great success with some of the most famous magazines in the country in the years leading up to the war. His most famous piece, the Uncle Sam poster, started out as a magazine cover illustration for *Leslie's Weekly,* before it enjoyed a new life as a recruiting poster. During World War I, he created forty-six images to support the war effort, which is remarkable when you recall that the United States was only drawn into the war in 1917, just a year before the Armistice. Flagg also created many war images during World War II and had a long, successful career.

Subject Matter and Visual Analysis

Wake Up, America! depicts a beautiful young woman sleeping comfortably in a chair. Wearing a dress with a red and white striped skirt and a blue bodice, she is the personification of America. She wears a red Phrygian cap with a blue and white star border, symbolizing liberty. The Phrygian cap has its origins in ancient Rome, where it was used to designate those who had been released from the bonds of slavery. It was an important symbol of liberty in the French Revolution as well as in American imagery. The figure of America appears to be seated on a chair inside a home, but the chair is positioned near an open door that leads out to an ominous landscape.

The representation of the woman is large in relation to the space, and the treatment of her body and the

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surroundings are very naturalistic, though generalized. She lounges comfortably in her chair, one hand resting on her lap. Her head lies on an overstuffed pillow. The chair seems to be positioned in an interior space, and a landscape is visible through the open door or window. Aside from the vivid red, white, and blue of her clothing, the colors are mostly varying shades of brown and gray. These muted tones draw even more attention to America's symbolic costume.

Contextual Analysis

In the early years of World War I, the United States remained a neutral force. This changed in April 1917 when the U.S. Congress voted to declare war as German forces became increasingly aggressive. Not everyone agreed that entering the war was in the best interests of the country. Many anti-war activists opposed the war on principle, and given its great ethnic diversity, the broad citizenry of the United States was quite divided on the issue. Many people with ancestry in Germany, Italy, and Ireland had their own national affinities, though the popular media expressed overwhelming support for England.

Americans had watched carefully as the war developed and had begun preparing well before 1917. Even so, many people still felt ambivalent, even complacent, about the conflict. For this reason, propaganda posters urging action were important not only to recruit soldiers, but also to gain the necessary public support.

In Flagg's poster, America is shown as a woman who has been able to sit back and sleep, willfully luxuriating while others abroad have suffered. The artist intentionally triggered feelings of patriotism in order to promote the idea that entry into the war was a matter of national importance. He also used the Phrygian cap, a symbol of liberty, to emphasize that the war, in defense of liberty and freedom, was justified. The poster is a call to action that uses a visual language that is direct and easy to decipher.

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Art and the Embodiment of Memory: War Memorials

Even in the midst of the war, individuals, groups of citizens, civic organizations, and governments began to erect memorials as a way of addressing the loss and trauma of World War I. Countless memorials were commissioned in the decades that followed, especially in the countries that suffered the most severe losses, such as France and England. The impulse to create public memorials was more restrained in the United States when compared to many European nations. This can perhaps best be explained by the fact that many memorials in Europe were erected on the sites of significant battles, and the United States did not have sites invested with meaning in the same way, given that battles were not fought on U.S. soil. In addition, although the death toll for the United States was very high, it did not reach the staggering levels of loss faced by European nations.

The tradition of creating war memorials in the public context existed prior to World War I. In France, for example, there were numerous memorials created to commemorate the Franco-Prussian War. However, prior to World War I, monuments celebrating war victories had been more common than memorials dedicated to those whose lives had been lost. Of course, World War I resulted in a death toll that far eclipsed any war ever fought, affecting people of all social classes and sectors of society in many places throughout the world. Losses included volunteer and conscripted members of the military as well as civilians. People from European colonies were called to serve in large numbers, and so the impact was felt far beyond the battle sites. Loss was so widespread as to seem universal, and memorials were a way to grieve and to make a compelling argument for continued peace. The desire to create memorials for World War I continued until World War II, when the number of memorials for the earlier war at last began to decline.

Types of Memorials

In the aftermath of World War I, many individuals and families created memorials for their loved ones, such as small displays in the home, which often included photographs, letters, medals, and other objects representing the deceased. These kinds of memorials were intended to provide the opportunity for private mourning. Public memorials were erected at sites that could be accessed by anyone and were intended to attract a larger, more generalized audience. These public memorials were placed in cities and towns as well as in the countryside. In urban areas, they appeared in market places, traffic islands, churchyards, and street corners, for example. Rural memorials were sometimes destinations, attracting visitors who wished to reflect on the war. These memorials often transformed former battlefields into sites of mourning. Cemeteries were also important locations for memorials.

Historians who study memorials generally divide them into two basic types: utilitarian and non-utilitarian forms. Utilitarian memorials, also called living memorials, serve an obvious function in addition to memorializing the dead. Examples include parks, hospitals, museums, bridges, clocks, and civic centers. These memorials often also include ornamental sculptures or plaques. Non-utilitarian memorials take many forms, such as arches, sculptures, and monuments, but these kinds of memorials serve no concrete function beyond acting as sites of remembrance.

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